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HAMLET'S "BRAVE O'ERHANGING FIRMAMENT"

Hamlet's famous lines on "this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire" have often been quoted as one of the finest passages in Shakespeare. For example, Churton Collins¹ uses them to illustrate "the style where Shakespeare has raised prose to the sublimest pitch of verse"; and Professor Albert S. Cook² uses them—to the disadvantage of the dramatist—in comparing Shakespeare's prose and the Bible. I have long suspected that these lines were not without an undercurrent of humor—that in writing them the poet was slyly laughing in his sleeve; and recently I have come upon evidence that strengthens this suspicion. On the basis of this may I offer an interpretation of the lines which, if it be correct, gives us an interesting glimpse of Shakespeare in a playful mood?

Professor Thornton S. Graves, in his excellent study, *The Court and the London Theatres during the Reign of Elizabeth*, pp. 22-26, makes it reasonably certain that the "heavens" of the Elizabethan playhouse covered not merely a part, but all, or nearly all, of the stage proper. Furthermore, he gives proof that the "heavens" was "fitted up, perhaps very elaborately, to represent the firmament." This effect was gained, it seems, by "painted canvas stretched overhead," on which were displayed the stars, and possibly other celestial objects. As Professor Graves remarks, such an elaborate adornment of the stage was "obviously intended to be seen by the entire audience."

Some of the actors must have felt a naïve pride in this "brave" firmament; R. M., in his "Character" of a Player (1629), says: "If his action prefigure passion, he raves, rages, and protests much by his *Painted* heavens." But did Shakespeare feel any pride in it? That he, as well as Jonson, did not approve of the use of the "heavens" for lower-

ing persons to the stage we know, for in his plays he avoids this sensationalism; and we may well believe that the "painted" firmament with its gilded stars seemed to him tawdry. If so, he might laugh slyly and good-naturedly at the "majestical roof." Hamlet in speaking the lines must have pointed towards this crude representation of the firmament, and his words, therefore, may have a double meaning.

Again, the reference to the air as a "foul and pestilent congregation of vapors" may very well be a half-humorous satire on the heavy atmosphere of the theatre, laden with the "foul" breath of the "stinkards" in the pit, and the "pestilent" smoke of the tobacco-takers, who sat on the stage as well as in the galleries. Tobacco, we know, was vended in the theatres, and a large part of the audience smoked:

"At these spectacles . . . the English are constantly smoking."—Hentzner, *A Journey into England*, 1598 (tr. by Walpole).

"He looks like a fellow that I have seen accommodate gentlemen with tobacco in our theatres."—*The Queen of Corinth*, III, i.

"The Tobacco-men, that used to walk up and downe the playhouses, selling for a penny-pipe, that which was not worth twelve-pence an horse-load."—*The Actors Remonstrance*.

Thomas Dekker in several places gives us an excellent conception of the "vapor" that arose from the groundlings who were herded together in the pit:

"Their playhouses smoakt euerye after noone with Stinkards, who were so glewed together in crowdes with the Steames of strong breath, that when they came forth, their faces lookt as if they had beene perboyled."—*The Seuen Deadly Sinnes of London*.

"The basest stinkards in London, whose breath is stronger than garlicke and able to poison all the twelve-penny roomes."—*The Raven's Almanacke*.

If the "brave" firmament was "o'erhanging" the stage, and if Hamlet pointed up, and if the atmosphere was foul with tobacco smoke,

¹ *Studies in Shakespeare*, 1904, p. 197.

² *The Authorized Version of the Bible and its Influence*, 1910, pp. 55-59.

could an Elizabethan spectator with his nimble wits fail to see the humor of these lines? And, as addressed to the stupid Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, are they not in keeping with Hamlet's humorous jibes at the stupid Polonius? And does not humor explain what Professor Cook found objectionable in the passage: "How repetitious! 'Canopy'—'firmament'—'roof'—thus it is amplified"?

I may call attention to another case in which an Elizabethan playwright refers humorously to the interior structure of the theatre. Thomas Heywood, in *The English Traveller* (ed. Pearson, vol. IV, pp. 63-64), while pretending to describe a dwelling bought by young Lionell, really describes the stage about the actors:

Reig. What brave carv'd posts! Who knows but here

In time, sir, you may keep your shrevaltie.
And I be one oth' Serjants.

Old Lio. They are well carv'd.

Reig. . . . Look that way, sir.

What goodly fair bay windows!

Old Lio. Wondrous stately.

Reig. And what a gallerie! How costly ceiled!
What painting round about!

Professor M. W. Sampson has pointed out a far more interesting case in *The Roaring Girl*, I, i, 131-153 (Bullen's ed. Middleton, vol. IV, pp. 19-20); and doubtless other examples could be noted.

Bearing these facts in mind, and remembering that Hamlet is addressing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, that noble pair of fops, and at a time when he wished to make them think him cracked in his wits, we might readily conceive of the lines as half-humorous. We might then interpret the passage thus:

This goodly framé,* the earth [*with a sweep of the arm, taking in the "frame" of the Globe*] seems to me a sterile promontory; this

*The word "frame" is regularly used of the body of the playhouse. In the contract for building the Fortune we read: "With a stadge and tyreing-house, to be made and sett upp within the said frame"; "and also all the saide frame and the stearcases therof to be sufficiently enclosed without with lathe, lyme, and haire . . . all the princypall and maine poastes of the said frame," etc.

most excellent canopy, the air [*pointing overhead to the blue painted canvas*], look you [*again directing attention to the "painted heavens"*], this brave 'o'erhanging' firmament, this majestic roof fretted with golden fire, why it appears no other thing to me than—a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours.⁶

I am well aware that to many this interpretation of the passage will seem sacrilegious; probably Dr. Samuel Johnson, could he speak from the other world, would apply to it his favorite epithet "obscene." And I realize that we must consider the passage in connection with what immediately follows. Here I find serious objection to reading any humor into the apostrophe. Yet it may be that Shakespeare, in spite of the lofty character of the passage as a whole, introduced for a moment an undercurrent of humor; he is given to this. Or it may even be—although this seems unlikely—that the lines which follow were ironical. Hamlet has just had an example of what "man is" in the case of his supposed friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; and now as he looks straight at them he speaks with a meaning that is clear to the audience and puzzling to the two fops he is addressing:

"What a piece of work is a man! how noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form and

"Brave" in the sense of "showy," used disparagingly.

The word "o'erhang" has given at least one commentator trouble. Knight says: "Using 'o'erhanging' as a substantive, and omitting 'firmament', the sentence is, perhaps, less eloquent, but more coherent. . . . If this interpretation be correct, the word 'firmament', which is applied to the heavens generally, was rejected by Shakespeare [it is omitted, doubtless by accident, in the First Folio] as conveying an image unsuited to that *idea of a part* which is conveyed by the substantive, 'o'erhanging.'" The adjective "o'erhanging" very nicely describes the "heavens" in its relation to the stage. The contract for the building of the Hope reads: "And shall also builde the heavens over the said stadge, to be borne or carried without any postes or supporters."

*Compare *Antony and Cleopatra*, V, ii, 213: "In their thick breaths, Rank of gross diet, shall we be enclouded, And forced to drink their vapours"; and *Julius Caesar*, I, ii, 248.

moving how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals!"

I do not maintain that these interpretations of the passage are correct; I merely offer them as interesting and possible. Perhaps the reader will find some pleasure in observing his reaction to the lines considered in this light.

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Geschichte der Deutschen Literatur. Von Dr. LILLIAN L. STROEBE und Dr. MARIAN P. WHITNEY. New York, Henry Holt and Company, 1913. 8vo., ix + 273 pp.

According to the Preface, "This little book is intended to meet the special needs of American students as a background for all courses in German Literature." A book of this kind, especially for "those teachers who believe that the foreign tongue should be the language of the class-room," has long been a want. Whether or not such a book should be a schematic outline rather than a history of literature "treated as an organic whole," depends upon the preference or needs of the individual teacher. The book under review aims to represent German literature as an organic whole and includes chapters on historical, social and economic conditions reflected in the literature, besides chronological tables, brief chapters on dramaturgy and the history of the language, and a bibliography. The book can undoubtedly be made useful in the class-room, especially as a companion volume to such anthologies as those of Calvin Thomas and Dr. K. H. Collitz. Some of the chapters, especially the "Einleitungen," are well written. The whole book has continuity and it is generally accurate. But a book so limited in size implies limitations also in scope. The ambition "to serve as a background for all courses in German literature" exceeds its attainment.

The Preface criticizes other books of similar

intent because those books if "published in this country have sacrificed everything to simplicity of style and vocabulary" while "those issued in Germany for Germans are written in very difficult and condensed language." In both cases the authors fail to specify the books they have in mind. Carla Wenckebach's well-known *Deutsche Literaturgeschichte*, written for American students, surely does not "sacrifice everything to simplicity of style and vocabulary." The arraignment of German books could not well include books like that of Kluge, and only books of the Kluge type could be brought into comparison with the book under review. I grant that the language of the latter is often simple and, as in the synopsis of the *Nibelungenlied*, diffuse rather than condensed. On the other hand, students who have arrived at the point where the study of the history of literature becomes properly part of their work, should be able to read Kluge, and even references to standard works like Scherer, Vogt und Koch, etc., without much difficulty. If literary history is studied before that point has been reached, the study of a German book involves an investment of time which could be more profitably spent in reading literary masterpieces.

The reviewer has his doubts as regards the availability of one and the same book for the use of both High School pupils and College students. There is a vast difference between the mental status and trained ability of a fourth year High School pupil and a Junior at College, even if the latter has had but limited training in German. As a matter of fact, the last part of this *Literaturgeschichte*, treating of the nineteenth century literature that is chiefly read by beginners in the High School and College, i. e., the modern short story (Storm, Gottfried Keller, C. F. Meyer, Hauff, etc.) is so condensed as not to be of any value for this class of students. The synopsis of the *Nibelungenlied* again, which is simple enough in style for beginners, does not come within the scope of beginners, while it is too simple to test the ability of more mature students. Assuredly books should be graded with reference to the stage of advancement of the student.